

A Punitive System Of Support For The Needy

by Lynda Crawford

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After a divorce, a 27-year-old Brooklyn woman lost her home and ended up in a city shelter with her four children. She was found eligible for public assistance, and for a city program called Housing Stability Plus, which would try to find her housing.

But there were problems.

Like other people on welfare, she had to participate in work programs to keep her benefits. But one of her sons, an eight-year-old, has special needs. Since this was the summer, she enrolled him in a daycare program so that she could show up for her work assignments. But she was frequently called to pick him up because of his behavior problems, making it impossible for her to comply with work assignments; she also said she did not receive notice of the assignments.

She explained the problem to her case worker, presenting documents from her son's doctors and confirmation of her son's difficulties from the day care center. It didn't matter. She was sanctioned.

"Her housing is threatened and every aspect of her life is threatened," said Craig Acorn of the [Community Service Society](#), who is her attorney. In Acorn's experience, this woman's case is typical of our current inflexible welfare system. "Most people in the system don't have a problem with wanting to comply with work rules. They are willing to do whatever it takes to keep their benefits," Acorn said. "But the system doesn't really accommodate the person's needs. It's inflexible. If you miss one date, you are punished. It's extraordinarily punitive..."

"It is almost impossible to figure out the total number of people being sanctioned by the system," said Don Friedman, a policy analyst at the Community Service Society, "but I can very conservatively say that one-third of all public assistance households face sanctions in the course of a year. This is just for noncompliance of work rules. This doesn't include the many other situations that can lead to sanctions or terminations of assistance, such as failure to comply with re-certification or one of myriad other administrative requirements and hurdles. And it would be reasonable to estimate that up to half of the public assistance population faces a reduction or termination of benefits in the course of a year. This is evidence of a system that is highly dysfunctional.

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"A society can be measured by how it treats its most vulnerable people," Friedman said, and providing a system of support that enables a poor family to meet its most basic needs would be a positive indicator. New York City's current welfare policies, he argues, do not provide that support.

"If I had to name the two most revealing indicators of our society's reluctance to assist the very needy," said Friedman, "it would be (1) the inadequacy of benefits, and (2) that it is a punishment driven system."

Inadequate Benefits

The rent portion of the welfare grant was recently increased from \$286 to \$400 for the first time in 15 years. "This is not an insignificant amount," says Friedman, "but relative to the increase in the cost of rental housing over the last 15 years, this increase will not remotely keep pace with the cost of even the most modest housing. And the rest of the grant has not increased at all in 15 years, while the cost of living has gone up 50 or 60 percent. In effect, the value of the grant has been cut in half.

"How could you let a system that was totally inadequate 15 years ago lose half its value?"

A family of three in New York City getting public assistance and food stamps receives a value of some 75 percent of the federal poverty level. "Now the federal poverty level is an unrealistically low figure," says Friedman, "so to put a family at 75 percent of that is to condemn them to deep poverty." By contrast, in 1975, the welfare grant and food stamps put a family at 125 percent of the poverty level.

At a recent meeting of the [Welfare Reform Network](#), New York State Assemblymember Deborah Glick expressed similar concerns. "Families cannot meet basic income needs even at the poverty level," Glick said. "The estimate for self-sufficiency for people living in New York City is 347 percent of the poverty level." Glick's figures come from testimony in September provided by the Fiscal Policy Institute at a hearing before the Assembly Social Services Committee on the "Effect of Welfare Reform Policy in New York State."

Realities of Life in Poverty

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To get another angle on this situation, Friedman directs readers to the Web site of the city's [Human Resources Administration \(HRA\)](#) for a snapshot of those receiving or applying for public assistance. Reviewing the chart, it becomes evident that a considerable number of people on welfare -- 43 percent this particular week -- are acknowledged by the system to have disabilities, be they physical or mental, or to be living with AIDS or substance abuse, or to be afflicted by other situations that aren't broken down, such as domestic violence or low levels of education. "These are the realities of life in poverty," said Friedman.

Looking further down the HRA chart, we learn that the number of people participating in education or training this particular week is three percent. Adding in those with access to training in the Work Experience Program -- 0.4 percent -- it is clear that a very small percentage of people on public assistance are participating in education and training, strategies widely acknowledged to be long-term solutions to poverty.

"There is no question that education is the way out," said Assemblymember Glick. "Eighty-eight percent of women who have access to four years of college never return to the welfare rolls. Forty-eight percent of welfare recipients have no high school diploma. And 75 percent of New York City employers require two years of college for entry level positions."

Doling Out Punishment

Friedman now asks readers to follow the HRA chart down to the percentage of those threatened with sanctions or being sanctioned: 26 percent.

Meant to enforce compliance with all requirements and insure that people collecting benefits are still in need, sanctions in New York State involve a reduction in benefits. The Giuliani administration once suggested the welfare to work program would grind to a halt without sanctions. And although Mayor Bloomberg has been considerably less feisty about it, a recent New York Times article [reports](#) that while the number of people receiving assistance has declined under Bloomberg, "the percentage of recipients punished for not complying with work programs has stayed roughly the same as in the Giuliani years."

Numerous attempts were made to discuss the sanction policy with the city's Human Resources Administration, but calls were not returned.

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"There is no evidence that sanctions promote better behavior," says Assemblymember Glick. "And of all the factors affecting the well-being [of the poor], sanctions are the most pernicious."

One [national study](#) of programs that enforced mandates found "higher sanction rates were not associated with higher participation rates. Some observers contend that programs that do a good job of communicating expectations to recipients do not need to sanction as often."

[The Human Resources Administration's own study](#) found the sanctioned population more likely to be young and African American, with more children and with less education than the agency's average welfare recipients. This past May, HRA opened an [Intensive Case Management Center](#) (in pdf format) to "explain sanction policy and process to sanctioned clients, conduct more detailed assessments, and offer a full menu of appropriate services including job placement, health care/mental health evaluation, education and training."

Errors Are Made

Welfare clients have the right to request a fair hearing if they feel they have been unfairly sanctioned. "In New York City, there is a very high reversal rate," said Vicki Lens, an assistant professor at the Columbia University School Of Social Work, whose work often focuses on welfare and welfare reform. In 2002, the reversal rate was 80 percent. "This shows that errors have been made."

Many people who are sanctioned or denied benefits don't even request fair hearings. "They don't think it's worth it," said Lens. "Or they think the system is biased against them. They depend on the agency for survival and so they don't want to challenge it. Or they are isolated and feel afraid to do it on their own." Still, more people complain in New York City (6.8 percent) than elsewhere (one percent or less).

"Most people receiving federal welfare benefits are single mothers of young children," said Lens. "Some struggle with low wage jobs, others have disabilities or health problems, or children with disabilities that prevent them from working. They need compassion and support, not sanctions."

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